Tips for Evaluating and Prioritizing Grant Applications

Evaluating and making sound decisions on what grants to fund can seem daunting, but by understanding your organization's strategy and priorities, and having a detailed rubric to measure against, the process can run much more smoothly.

1. **Set a deadline:** Set a deadline for accepting grant applications so that you have the biggest pool of grant applications as possible to evaluate at one time. This allows you to evaluate the strengths of the applications against one another to make a better informed decision on what investment is best.

2. **Set priorities**: Understand what your organization's main priority is from these grants. Are you aiming to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program? Do you want to increase the number of sites that serve summer meals? Are you trying to get more schools to serve meals at the end of the school day? Do you want to test new and innovative programs to reach more kids? List your organization's priorities and make sure to refer to them before, during, and after the grant evaluation.

3. **Convene a panel:** Convene a panel of two to three evaluators who will review the grant applications and evaluate their strengths. The panel of reviewers can be made up of program staff, or it can be cross-departmental if your granting strategy touches various departments in your organization.

4. **Create a rubric:** Based on your organization's priorities, create a rubric to quantify the strength of each application. Depending on the length and complexity of your grant application, consider creating five to ten questions or criteria statements to help you guide your evaluation of the grants. Use a scale, like 1 to 5 (1 = weak, incomplete, or poor; 5 = strong, complete, or excellent) to grade each application on each criteria. To get an average score for each grant application, sum the scores and divide by the number of criteria. Include a notes section to capture questions about the application or explain your rationale for the grades.

Below is an example of an evaluation rubric:

Organization Name: XYZ   **Amount requested: $3,000**

Evaluation Question	Grade
Applicant has demonstrated an understanding of the challenges with participation in the program in the target area.	3
Applicant has proposed a well thought out plan to increase the number of children participating in the program.	5
Grant funds are needed for successful implementation and the program is likely to be sustainable after the initial grant.	2
The proposed outcomes in this grant application help achieve the organization's goals.	3
Total	**3.25**

5. **Create a Spreadsheet:** Use a spreadsheet to organize the details for each applicant and proposal evaluation so that you can see all of the information in the same place. Include the name of the organization, geographic area, requested amount, and scores in the spreadsheet. Use this as a guide for discussion with your panel of evaluators. Consider various aspects of each application and the strength of the potential grantee. Do you know this particular organization to be one that does great work, but perhaps wasn't able to articulate their program in their application? Have you worked with them previously and can vouch for their effectiveness? Use the evaluation as a guide, but not as the only determining factor when making a final decision.

Questions for consideration when reviewing applications

Organization Background

- Is the applicant's mission clearly stated?
- Are the program goals, strategies and timeline detailed and clearly outlined?
- Does the proposal clearly define the impact of the program, such as number of children reached, number of meals served, or increase in program participation?
- Do their goals and strategies meet the needs of their target area?

Measurable Impact

- What difference does the program make beyond what would have happened without it?
- Does the applicant's plans/methods, timeline, and measurable impact give a level of evidence commensurate with their stage of growth and funding request level?

Organizational Capacity Challenges

- What portion of the funding request addresses capacity challenges?
- Will they receive funding elsewhere to address those challenges?

Historical Activity in Critical Program Areas

- What level of experience do they have with the program?
- Do they have proven ability to grow their reach?

Budget

- Does the budget match the program priorities?
- Are the descriptions of each request sufficient?
- Ask the following: what's missing here? Where did they over-request?

Things to look for as red flags when evaluating grant applications

If you are only granting to non-profits, is the applicant in good standing with the IRS? Use the IRS website and grantr.com to confirm if an applicant is good to grant. If they are not good to grant, that's a red flag.

Speak to state agencies to determine if they've worked with certain organizations. State agencies can provide insight on if a grantee was not compliant with regulations and/or was not accepted to run a specific program (e.g. Summer Meals Programs). If the state agency does not recommend a certain grantee, that's a red flag.